

Speeches of Robert M. La Follette

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WISCONSIN
HISTORICAL
SOCIETY

Speech

"The Greatest Issue of the Day," Milwaukee.

Lizzie Black Kandar Papers. Wisconsin Historical Society

The Greatest issue of the Day- n.d. ①

Ever since that fateful Friday of Jan. 17th, when I received notice from the Entertainment Committee of the Literary & Social Life, to be prepared with a 10 minutes 'talk' on the Greatest issue of the day, my mind has been in a constant whirl as to what that vital question really is.

Thanks I to myself, this Society is clamoring for a correct solution and the speedy settlement of the Armenian Troubles - Well - They can't get that out of me!

And then, before I had time for further reflection, Venusella, with her great long arms outstretched - came dancing before my mind - imploring me in her most persuasive tones, to try and help her gain her rights. Sorry for you, Venusella, not to-night! Can't possibly expect me to settle that important 'boundary line', in 10 short minutes, when I myself & every member present - has done nothing else but fret & worry about it for the past two months.

Next came gallant struggling Cuba, offering me any & every inducement if I could only help liberate her!

Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony and Mrs. Minona Phipps - scared me most to death by saying I would not be doing my duty to my country, to my children, if I advanced any

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other cause but that of Woman's Suffrage!
And so we came to a mutual understanding
and We? decided that the Greatest issue of
the day was The New Woman.

You'd do me the greatest kind of a favor
if you'd tell them that I had her almost
ready for presentation to the society, this
evening - But an incident occurred which
changed the whole current of my thoughts.

It was downtown in one of our large furniture
stores. The massive front door was gently opened
and a small lad of about 12 years, with dark
complexion, and bright but rather dirty face,
with unmistakable Hebrew features, carrying on
his arm a great long basket, timidly approached
the proprietor & with a genuine business air,
offered his, Matches for sale cheap! He
attracted the attention of everyone within hearing
and the merchant, more pleased with the
good salesmanship of the little fellow, than by
the quality of his wares immediately bought
25 cts worth.

I followed the lad, asked him his name &
address & why he did not go to school?

He explained the necessity of his having
to help support the family. His father was
sick, a sister 14 years old, had never gone to school
was doing the housework and taking care of the children,
while his mother was occupied all day, tending a fruit stand, at the market.

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Having had my attention drawn to numerous similar cases of late, my mind became so absorbed in them, that all other thoughts sank into oblivion, & I resolved then & there that I would submit to you the welfare and happiness of these Little Russian Refugees, knowing that their education and enlightenment is to us the most vital the 'Greatest issue of the Day'.

We must be careful lest history again repeats itself and the outcome of all these religious wars, again culminate in the persecution of the Jews.

Just because we are Jews, our lives and actions must be above reproach. We must be more honest, more straightforward than any other nationality.

We must try and uplift our downtrodden and unfortunate brethren, not alone for their own sakes and for that of humanity but for the protection and reputation of our own nationality.

Their misdeeds reflect directly on us and every one of us individually ought to do all in his power, to help lay the foundation of good citizenship in them.

What wonderful strength of character, have these people displayed, when in spite of the ~~many~~ hardships heaped upon them, in spite of the oppressions - many of them have surmounted all obstacles are getting along nicely.

The wonderful transition which often takes place in a comparatively short time, is enough to arouse the admiration and wonder of the whole enlightened world, often creating jealousy and hatred in such narrow minded and bigoted relics of the middle ages as are now trying to engender ~~hatred~~ prejudice against the whole Hebrew Race.

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Tradition has painted us as proverbial for our skill in money making. I consider this a proud distinction. Who can afford to belittle money. Money is power, is necessary for the advancement of civilization, art & science. I do not doubt that through energy & industry, all of those bright little Russians, who have sought refuge in our midst, will in time be well-to-do.

What I fear most is their ignorance! If we allow things to go on as they are, their education will not keep pace with their worldly advancement. And here is where the mischief lies. The fact of it is, ^{but the opportunities are denied them} they are anxious to learn; Can't we help them out of this difficulty? Can't we open up an evening school ^{where} the foundation of their education can be made, the English language taught?

A school of this description was conducted here several years ago, with elegant results, why did we allow that to discontinue?

Let us arouse ourselves [&] ~~our~~ ^{our} citizens to the seriousness of the situation; to the necessity of ~~the~~ immediate action.

Let us all join hands and promise that we will encourage & help this and all ^{other} ~~movements~~ ^{movements} towards

their educational advancement and you can rest assured, we will gain the respect of the community, & be more than repaid for our time & trouble & the coming generation will be only too glad to acknowledge ^{your} relationship to 'The Little Russian Refugee'.